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FIGHTING THE ODDS: MILITANT SUFFRAGISTS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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The South was slow to develop an organized woman suffrage movement, and South Carolina was certainly no exception. Yet well before the end of the nineteenth century there were signs of suffrage sentiment and involvement within the state. The American Equal Rights Association, formed shortly after the Civil War to further the interests of women and Negroes, listed a South Carolina woman among its vice-presidents in 1869. A woman's rights convention was held in Columbia in 1870 with the blessing of the Reconstruction government.¹ Such examples were relatively few and far between, however, and the first significant organizing efforts in the South did not occur until the 1890s. For South Carolina the beginnings came with the formation of a state association of about 250 women and men who believed in equal rights and were willing to circulate literature on the subject. Their cause was buttressed as such notables as Susan Anthony, Henry Blackwell, Alice Stone Blackwell and Laura Clay gave addresses in the state around the turn of the century.² The movement then suffered a decade of stagnation (known as the doldrums), revitalizing itself in the South around 1910 as suffragists became active in attempts to end child labor, improve working conditions for women and in other struggles identified with the cause of progressivism. The rebirth in South Carolina came with the establishment of a State Equal Suffrage League in May 1914, consisting of three city leagues (Spartanburg, Columbia and Charleston) and a membership of about 450. That number increased threefold in less than two years with the number of leagues totalling eight, all affiliated with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).³

The spark that most dramatically affected the American suffrage scene, however, was the transposition of the tactics of the

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Pankhurst-led British militant movement by a young Quaker social worker Alice Paul. For a time the head of the Congressional Committee of the NAWSA, Alice Paul soon split from the NAWSA and its static methods and created the Congressional Union (later the National Woman's Party) to work directly for a federal suffrage amendment. After failing to gain control of the NAWSA's state societies in the East and South by late 1914, the Congressional Union (CU) embarked on its own program of establishing state branches.

The impact of this new and rival suffrage organization was soon felt in South Carolina. A woman from Cheraw joined others in the East Room of the White House in January 1915 to pressure President Wilson to influence the upcoming vote in the House, in accordance with Alice Paul's policy of holding the party in power responsible for the failure to enact the suffrage amendment. Susan Frost, President of the Charleston Equal Suffrage League, journeyed to the far West to speak to visitors before the special suffrage exhibit of the Congressional Union at the Panama Pacific Exposition in the spring of 1915. Much interest in woman suffrage resulted from the visits of Lila Meade Valentine, President of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, to the state in 1914-1915. Valentine was greatly affected by the English suffragettes, and like Alice Paul and the members of the Congressional Union, believed that working toward a federal amendment was more feasible than the state by state approach which had left the movement far short of its goal. She helped to found the Columbia Suffrage League, addressed audiences in several other cities, and in early 1915 appeared before the South Carolina legislature, captivating the lawmakers with her tact, charm and ability as a speaker.

But ancient taboos and patterns of thought left sympathies for woman suffrage in the South weaker than in most parts of the country, and made the Congressional Union task in South Carolina

5 Mentioned in the account of the formation of the South Carolina branch of the Congressional Union, *The Suffragist*, III, November 27, 1915, p. 8.
difficult and frustrating. Prevailing southern notions of chivalry coupled with, as one suffragist put it, "general fear among women that some men will think her unwomanly should she claim a right to the franchise," 8 underlined that there was only one proper sphere for women. There was also the race question—the concern that woman suffrage would in some way legitimize Negro suffrage and pave the way for the re-entry of Negroes into politics. As the third suffrage organization in the South (besides the NAWSA and Kate Gordon's Southern States Woman Suffrage Association), with a cosmopolitan, northern and liberal national leadership, the Congressional Union was vulnerable to the label of radical meddling outsiders. Working for a federal amendment in traditional states' rights territory further exposed the CU to attack.9

While South Carolina Congressmen, especially Benjamin Tillman and Ellison Smith, were ardent in maintaining that enfranchising women was not a matter for the national government to decide,10 the Congressional Union consistently maintained that the states' rights shibboleth throughout the South was more a pretext than a principle. One Suffragist columnist, noting the "singular inconsistency" of Congressmen representing states which readily accepted federal aid for good roads, harbors and fisheries and disease control, concluded "it is only when they wish to sidestep some important duty; something which does not involve a slice of patronage or chunk of pork—that these statesmen become so keen for differing between the functions of the 'sovereign state' and the 'federal government.' " 11 Mary Ritter Beard, wife of the emerging historian Charles Beard, frequently used the CU publication to attack the Democratic party's contradictory record.12 The Suffragist intensified its charges after passage of the Keating-Owen Act and with continuing support among Southern Democrats for the prohibition

10 See Benjamin Tillman's comments in The Suffragist, VI, March 26, 1918, p. 4.
11 Ibid., I and II, July 25, 1914, p. 3.
amendment, pointing out in the case of the former, that the child labor bill was "a much greater infringement of states' rights than a federal suffrage amendment could possibly be." South Carolina congressmen were among those barraged with valentines in 1916, and no doubt the sentiments directed toward the powerful Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Edwin Y. Webb of North Carolina, were aimed at other inconsistent legislators:

Federal aid he votes for rural highways,
And Federal aid for pork each to his need;
And Federal aid for rivers, trees and harbors,
But Federal aid for women?—No, indeed.13

Alice Paul and the Congressional Union also hammered away at the other distinctly regional problems they faced. In their effort to ameliorate Southern concerns on the race issue, suffragists adopted what has been labeled a "statistical argument," that woman suffrage would automatically increase the preponderance of white over Negro voters, so that even educated, property-owning Negroes could not wield political power.14 In late 1914 the CU newspaper verified census figures which showed that there were 4,472,336 more white women than Negro women in Dixie, and that white women outnumbered the entire Negro population by 494,627. South Carolina was one of two states, Mississippi being the other, where Negro women outnumbered white women, but The Suffragist reassured that the states' requirement that a voter must be able to read and must own and pay taxes on three hundred dollars worth of property would effectively exclude the poor, illiterate black from the polls. The same article used the "expediency" argument15 to assert that granting the franchise would lessen the crime and immorality so associated with males, especially black ones, and concluded that the Negro question would not be complicated but "greatly simplified" by granting suffrage.16

15 The overall framework of the two types of arguments for woman suffrage, "justice" and "expediency" is advanced in Aileen Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920 (New York, 1971).
The federal amendment campaign in South Carolina began in earnest in June 1915. The Charleston News and Courier announced the coming of Elsie Hill, daughter of a Congressman from Connecticut and member of the executive committee of the CU, indicating that a store had been rented for the purpose of distributing literature and lemonade. Hill joined with Susan Frost in conducting a week of open-air meetings every noon and evening in the streets of Charleston. The women persuaded Representative Richard Whaley, First District Congressman and member of the important House Judiciary Committee, to be interviewed at the home of Miss Frost, an event, featured on the front page of the July 3 edition of The Suffragist, which highlighted the week’s work. In presenting a petition, signed by among others the presidents of the South Carolina Kindergarten Association and the Charleston Federation of Women’s Clubs, Susan Frost maintained that the state and nation needed their voice and ought to grant them the political freedom they as taxpayers, and as equals, ought to have. The leaders of the CU were delighted with the week of activity in Charleston. Alice Paul urged Susan Frost to have photographs taken of all deputations in South Carolina because they “tell the story so much better than long descriptive articles.” Vice-Chairman Lucy Burns acknowledged the “valuable publicity” of the open air meetings and indicated the mails would shortly bring five hundred copies of each of three pamphlets, copies of the annual report, membership cards, Suffragist subscription blanks and a hundred copies of the cover-story edition of the South Carolina delegation waiting on Representative Whaley.

By the end of the year 1915 Susan Frost was a member of the advisory council of the Congressional Union, and her tireless efforts had led to establishment of a branch of the national organization in South Carolina. Only Virginia, among other states of the South, had taken this step, and Alice Paul personally inaugurated the chapter at Hibernian Hall, the largest meeting place in Charleston. Alice Paul’s address emphasized that women needed the ballot in prop-

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17 On June 22, 1915, the News and Courier gave front page coverage to Elsie Hill’s visit and reported on other meetings and activities throughout the week.
19 Alice Paul to Susan Frost, July 29, 1915, Box 32, National Woman’s Party Papers, Library of Congress (hereinafter cited as NWP Papers, LC); Lucy Burns to Susan Frost, July 2, 1915, Box 31, NWP Papers, LC.
erly looking after their homes, “and if they need it for that, then it is certain they need it for protection when they go out in the world.” She noted the increased presence of women and children in the work force and the deplorable conditions of their labor. Her speech also traced some of the gains women had made over the years and included the prediction that

one hundred years hence people will think no more of women voting than they now think of them as nurses on the battlefield, as those who are allowed to sign their names to articles in papers and magazines, as they go to college, as they are now allowed to own property, as they now have some influence to the disposition of their children or as they now speak in public.20

Lobbyists for the Congressional Union/National Woman’s Party kept up steady pressure on Democratic congressmen. In late 1915 South Carolina Representative James F. Byrnes described the halls of Congress as “like a millinery shop,” and suggested it was necessary to start a Congressional investigation into the large supply of funds now in the hands of women for advancing the Susan Anthony amendment. In rebuttal Suffragist editors scoffed that “if Congress had had the intelligence to investigate us sooner, we should have been voting now.” By mid-1917 Congressman Byrnes was so besieged with letters for suffrage that he directed his secretary to consign all such future correspondence to the waste basket.21 In the waning days of his twenty-three-year Senate career, Benjamin Tillman was also a direct target of the wrath of the National Woman’s Party. In March 1918 Tillman jocosely read to his fellow legislators from the more than one thousand petitions he had recently received from students and teachers in South Carolina colleges, including Anderson Woman’s College, Coker, Converse and over eight hundred from Winthrop, which he had authorized as a Normal and Industrial College in his term as governor. In an editorial entitled “The Demand of the New South,” the Woman’s Party labeled Tillman a “stiff-necked gentleman of the old school,”

20 The South Carolina branch of the Congressional Union was formed November 17-18. See details, The Suffragist, III, November 27, 1915, p. 8. See also Charleston News and Courier, November 18, 1915, p. 2, for extended coverage of her address.

"typifying the attitude of the old South." They cast themselves as "the impatient young at the door," "the enthusiastic builders of the South that is to be," the spirit of the new South unrepresented by the old.22

When war came to the United States in 1917, the CU, unlike the NAWSA, continued its suffrage work. Elsie Hill told a Charleston audience this policy should not be equated with disloyalty but rather the continuance of woman's half century fight for freedom.23 Organizational philosophy held that it was totally inconsistent to wage a war in the name of democracy when democracy did not even exist at home. By the spring of 1917 the CU had evolved into the National Woman's Party, and Alice Paul accelerated organizational work in the Southern states to bring them in line with national reorganization and to put more pressure on Southern Democratic leaders in the House and Senate, especially the Chairmen of the Rules and Judiciary Committees. Following an automobile trip by the NWP vice-president and lobby chairman throughout the South, Doris Stevens of the executive committee and national organizer Beulah Amidon campaigned for a week from the lobby of the Charleston Hotel. There, in the banquet room amid the "purple, white and gold banners and bowls of daffodils, white marsh lilies and wisteria," the South Carolina branch of the National Woman's Party was formed on April 11, 1917. Doris Stevens evoked considerable laughter from her audience as she compared southern congressmen to male mudbirds who build a wall to isolate the female, bringing her cherries and other things each day. Stevens questioned what would happen if the male mudbird didn't come home and added, "besides, some don't bring home cherries."24 Mrs. E. W. Durant, Jr., of Charleston, daughter of General Porcher Miles and mother of eight, was named state chairman.25

The National Woman's Party chartered its new southern branches amidst the most controversial of its direct-action tactics.

22 The Suffragist, VI, March 26, 1918, pp. 4 and 8. VI, March 30, 1918, contains an exchange of sharp letters between Senator Tillman and Psyche Webster, Corresponding Secretary of the Fourth Congressional District Branch of the National Woman's Party, over these petitions.
23 Ibid., V, March 24, 1917, p. 7.
24 Charleston News and Courier, April 12, 1917, p. 10.
25 Ibid., March 17, 1917, p. 7; March 24, 1917, p. 7; "The Woman's Party Advance in the South," April 21, 1917, p. 8. See also, Alice Paul to Beulah Amidon, March 12, 1917, Box 61, NWP papers, LC, for instructions concerning this organizational work.
the picketing of the White House. Increasingly throughout 1917-
1918 South Carolina newspapers devoted coverage to the woman
suffrage question. Some were quite critical, including the Charleston
News and Courier which earlier had given good coverage to
CU/NWP activities in the city without editorial comment. In late
November 1917 it questioned whether force was actually employed
against the pickets, as the militants vigorously claimed. Reflecting
on the victorious referendum for woman suffrage in New York
state in the fall elections, the News and Courier credited President
Wilson with turning the tide and warned that it is "still a long way
to the Tipperary of the Constitutional Amendment and may be still
longer if the New York victory results in an enlarged crop of 'silent
sentinels' about the White House." 26

While many agreed with the sentiments of the News and
Courier and those of the Greenville News in its assessment of the
militants as just "a strong-arm squad, self-constituted to do the
rough work and whoop things up," 27 the issue itself was getting a
more serious treatment. In mid-1918 the Charleston Evening Post
cited President Wilson's own progress from mild interest to out-
right advocacy of woman suffrage by federal amendment as a clear
indication that votes for women was coming in the not too distant
future. 28 The Woman's Party picketing policy drew support among
South Carolina members, with Susan Frost predicting that "the
work the picketers have done will be regarded as one of the truly
great and majestic and far-reaching episodes in the onward march
of equal suffrage." Mrs. W. P. Vaughn of Greenville, who replaced
Mrs. Durant as state chairman, evaluated her own experience: "No
thinking woman who has stood on the picket line with a flag, who
has interviewed congressmen on suffrage, can have exactly her old
relation to her government." 29 Alice Paul urged Southerners to
sympathize with suffragists who were fighting for what was right
in the same manner that Confederate soldiers fought for the cause
they believed in. Mrs. Vaughn was hostess at a Woman's Party tea
held for Confederate veterans and Daughters of the Confederacy

26 Charleston News and Courier, November 9, 1917, p. 4; November 10,
1917, p. 4.
27 Ibid., February 24, 1917, p. 7.
28 Charleston Evening Post, March 5, 1918, as cited in The Suffragist, VI,
"Suffrage as an Immediate Issue," March 30, 1918, p. 7, and August 24, 1918,
p. 9.
during a reunion of Confederate veterans in Washington in mid-1917, a tea that served to link these two causes in the Southern mind.\textsuperscript{30}

Once the Wilson administration began its arrest, imprisonment and forced feeding of the suffragists in the summer of 1917, the National Woman's Party took its case to the people. In a “suffrage car” driven by a female companion, executive committee member Maud Younger spent several days in South Carolina telling of the repression of the administration in power. In Gaffney she spoke at the county fair; in Orangeburg, at an assemblage arranged by the Chamber of Commerce. Ex-Governor John Evans assisted with the Spartanburg meeting which drew approximately five hundred—with the superintendent of public schools presiding. There were also stopovers in Columbia, Union, Newberry, Branchville and Charleston.\textsuperscript{31} The jailing and forced feeding of Alice Paul particularly upset the sensibilities of southern audiences. The \textit{Charleston American}, while conceding that Miss Paul had “mistakingly, perhaps” carried banners before the White House, spoke for many in its grave concern over such “inhuman” and “outrageous” treatment of women, condemning President Wilson’s “inconsistencies” and “abandonment of the democratic ideals to which we have pledged our nation.”\textsuperscript{32} Susan Frost eloquently protested to the President about prison conditions “so revolting that a civilized nation shrinks from crediting their existence,” calling Alice Paul the “Kerensky of this country . . . who had sacrificed herself on the altar of liberty.”\textsuperscript{33}

Increasingly in the later years of the woman suffrage campaign, another South Carolina woman, Anita Pollitzer, became a force within the National Woman's Party. An artist from Charleston,\textsuperscript{34} she served as a good role model for southern women through her “indefatigable” war work with the Red Cross Civilian Relief Department in her city. At the same time she began to print suf-

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., V, “The South Salutes the Suffrage Sentinels,” June 9, 1917, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{31} See itinerary and details of the southern trip, ibid., September 22, 1917, p. 8; October 27, 1917, p. 9; December 8, 1917, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Charleston American}, November 10, 1917, as cited in ibid., V, November 17, 1917, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{33} Susan Pringle Frost to the President of the United States, October 30, 1917, as cited in \textit{The Suffragist}, November 10, 1917, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{34} Miss Pollitzer is credited with organizing the first suffrage rally ever held at the University of Virginia while teaching painting there in the summer of 1918. See Ibid., VI, June 29, 1918, p. 10, and November 16, 1918, p. 8.
franchise posters for the NWP. She quickly worked her way through the ranks, serving as press chairman for the South Carolina branch. This position found her sometimes doing battle with the newspapers of her city and state. Responding to a late 1917 Charleston News and Courier editorial which challenged the argument to give women the vote based on their good war work, when there were pacifists the likes of Jane Addams and Jeannette Rankin about, Pollitzer suggested an equally “logical” editorial item for a future issue: “if the idea is that men vote because they are doing good work in the war, what about Professor Beard and Senator Stone?” The South Carolina press chairman called for the government to “place women squarely on their feet” (grant them the vote) in order for them to be able to protect themselves (and young children) as they carried on the work of the government in the field, the shop and the munitions factory during the war.35

The Woman's Party regarded Anita Pollitzer as one of its most energetic, enthusiastic and efficient state press chairmen and maintained that the increasing sentiment for suffrage in South Carolina by 1918 was due largely to her efforts.36 Pollitzer subsequently became a national organizer, in which capacity she made a “deep impression on western women” in coordinating the campaign against Democrats in Wyoming and the West in 1918. After the suffrage amendment was passed, Pollitzer was sent to Virginia to work for ratification. She remained committed to the goals and leadership of the National Woman's Party in the twenties and thirties and by the mid-forties had become its chairman.37

With the death of Senator Benjamin Tillman in 1918, lobby efforts among South Carolina suffragists focused on his elected replacement for the rest of the term, William Pollock, a Democratic lawyer from Cheraw. Pollock's public support was eagerly sought, for the Senate had been only two votes shy of passing the Anthony amendment in October 1918. South Carolina newspapers, particularly the Greenville Piedmont and the Charleston Evening Post, published numerous editorials in what the Woman's Party de-

35 Charleston News and Courier, November 2, 1917, p. 4. See also editorial of October 30, 1917.
36 The Suffragist, VI, June 29, 1918, p. 10.
37 Pollitzer was at the center of a bitter power struggle within the NWP in the late forties, a battle that is particularly well-detailed in the Caroline Lexow Babcock and Olivia Hurlburt Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.
scribed as the “Helping Pollock to declare” campaign, urging him to abandon his sphinx-like silence. Even the conservative *Columbia State* gave space to personal letters urging Senator Pollock to commit himself. Woman’s Party Chairman Helen Vaughn co-ordinated petition gathering throughout cities and towns in the state and joined with newspapers in trying to convince Senator Pollock that he had an opportunity which only came to few in years of service in the Senate—to write himself down in the history of the country.  

Pollock finally broke his silence, delivering one of two speeches on the floor of the Senate before the vote was taken at the “lame duck” session of the Sixty-fifth Congress, but his was the only additional vote since the last polling. His replacement, Nathaniel Dial, joined “Cotton Ed” Smith on the nay side in the final tabulations.

Though the National Woman’s Party tried to keep its center-stage position through increasingly strident militancy in 1918-1919 (and Charleston was the first city where women in their prison uniforms tried to further embarrass the Wilson administration 40), the revitalization of the NAWSA under Carrie Chapman Catt was now complete. Thus the Woman’s Party’s niche in the history of woman suffrage remains clouded. As these two organizations hardly acknowledged the existence of the other, the multi-volume *History of Woman Suffrage* compiled by the NAWSA is incomplete; and even the revered studies of A. Elizabeth Taylor on suffrage activity in the southern states are marred by their rather quick dismissal of the militants.

Numerically, the National Woman’s Party never consisted of much more than a hundred members in South Carolina. Though it

38 See particularly the *Piedmont and Evening Post* coverage in *The Suffragist*, VII, January 18, 1919, p. 11; January 25, 1919, p. 14; February 1, 1919, p. 12; February 8, 1919, p. 14; also Helen Vaughn, “South Carolina Demands Suffrage Amendment,” February 8, 1919, pp. 5-6.

39 Senator Pollock’s entire speech is reprinted in ibid., February 15, 1919, pp. 10-12.

40 See ibid., March 1, 1919, pp. 4-5 for details of the “Prison Special” visit to Charleston.

ultimately established headquarters in three Congressional districts in the state, it succeeded in capturing only one NAWSA branch, the Greenville Equal Suffrage League. It even failed, by a narrow margin, of gaining control of the Charleston Equal Suffrage League headed by Susan Frost. But numbers are not indicative of the impact of the NWP, for Alice Paul, like Emmeline Pankhurst, depended on a hard-core brigade of veterans to foment the rebellion. And in the South, hostility to the cause placed more emphasis on strong, active leaders than hordes of followers. The southern suffrage movement was also practically a generation behind that of the North. With any reform movement the function of agitation is to dislodge people from their traditional pattern of thought by bringing before them new issues and, in turn, to liberate them for movement in new directions. The Woman's Party charted these different directions as it cast itself in a youthful yet poised image, impatient at the door, awakening the South to the dawn of a new day. Through its flags, banners, outdoor meetings and demonstrations the National Woman's Party not only brought innovative techniques to suffrage campaigning in South Carolina; more importantly, it educated the public, not in stuffy parlor rooms but in exciting open air or large theatre meetings, and in the process undoubtedly changed the conceptions some people had of themselves and of their rights and dues. While, in the final analysis, most southern women found the older system perfectly comfortable and satisfactory, there were also those, brushed by the fires of the militants, whose lives would never be quite the same.